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Making Sense of the Refugee Crisis:
Governance and Politicisation of Asylum-Seekers'
Reception in Northern Italy

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Abstract

Challenging and complementing the existing literature on the Italian refugee crisis, this working paper develops an actor-centred approach to open the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes, showing the constitutive effects of governance on the asylum issue. The approach developed is applied to the case of the Veneto region in Italy during the recent “refugee crisis”, a heuristic case-study that shows the value of the approach developed. The paper, first, investigates the cognitive and environmental mechanisms that shape key actors’ asylum policy decisions. Drawing concepts and ideas from framing and sensemaking theories, it shows that, while there is certainly a strategic element that shapes actors’ policy preferences, there is also a meaningful cognitive component in asylum governance. The analysis reveals, indeed, that actors’ strategies are powerfully shaped by political actors’ (different) understandings of public attitudes on migration, rather than by attitudes per se. Secondly, SNA is applied to examine how such understandings are located within and depend upon network relations and to investigate actors’ agency, power and interactions. The analysis shows that local asylum policy outcomes are deeply influenced by the “politics of policy-making”, i.e. by power dynamics and how powerful actors position themselves, behave and mobilise their understandings. Ultimately, the paper sheds light on the interplay between the “regulatory” and the “public reaction” dimensions of the Italian asylum crisis, illustrating the politicisation of asylum governance and the relationship between public attitudes on migration, frame emergence, policy-making, politics and public mobilisations in the active constitution of the Italian asylum crisis.

Keywords

Italy, asylum governance, refugee crisis, migration politics, political parties.

Introduction*

The former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi declared, in June 2017, that “we have to decrease the flow of asylum-seekers landing in Italy, because the system cannot cope with these unsustainable numbers”¹. It is a common understanding that asylum-seeking migration represented a significant challenge and threat to the Italian political system between 2014 and 2018. This paper questions this idea of asylum as a mere exogenous shock to the governance system. Rather than examining the constitutive effects of asylum-seeking migration on governance, indeed, it shows how asylum-seeking migration in Italy has been constituted as a social and political problem by the Italian governance system.

The main purpose of this paper is, therefore, to identify the operational and constitutive effects of governance systems on the asylum issue. To do this, it elaborates an actor-centred approach, using qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach allows to identify the effects of the governance system on asylum-seeking migration, by examining who the key actors are, how they frame and make sense of the issue, produce meanings and understandings of problems, and develop actions or inactions based on these understandings. The approach developed is then applied to the empirical case of Veneto. This Italian region is characterised by high levels of political contention around asylum, the dominant presence of the populist right-wing Lega Nord, and a weak and contested reception system for asylum seekers. The region represents a powerful heuristic case that enables to undertake an in-depth process-tracing and network analysis to illustrate the value of the approach developed and the wider conceptual claims.

More in detail, the paper aims to investigate three key questions:

First, which role do processes that construct meanings and understandings play in shaping actors’ strategies and actions? Addressing this question means investigating the cognitive dimension of governance and focusing on underlying perceptions held by actors within the asylum governance system and the role of the processes through which actors construct meanings and understandings in shaping their policy strategies. The impact of anti-migrant attitudes on the strategic preferences of political parties and policy-makers is often taken for granted (Gianfreda, 2017: 7), but how do political actors really understand, during the asylum crisis, “what is going on around them” and how they decide “what to do next”? How do they make sense of the effects of asylum-seeking flows and the challenges around them? How do they process this information? To what extent and how do anti-immigrant attitudes influence their strategies and decisions? The first part of this paper tackles these questions by investigating actors’ sensemaking processes and the social context within which their understandings emerge and have effects. The analysis will show that actors’ strategies and decisions are the product of articulated cognitive processes. In other words, it will show that anti-migrant public attitudes *per se* do not influence actors’ strategies: what really matters is how political actors frame and make sense of these attitudes, and these understandings and cognitive processes vary significantly among different groups of actors.

Secondly, this paper examines the role of politics in asylum governance and asks: “How did actors’ strategies influence asylum policymaking processes?” The widely recognized failures of Italian authorities in attempting to cope with migrant reception are often considered to be the outcome of structural inefficiencies (e.g. D’Angelo, 2018). But how have these failures been influenced by political dynamics or the “politics of policy-making” (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2018: 1) i.e. by the ideological

* The research from which these findings are derived was funded by the European Research Council for the project ‘Prospects for International Migration Governance’ (no. 340430) awarded to Professor Andrew Geddes.

¹ Source: <https://www.lastampa.it/2017/06/28/italia/immigrazione-renzi-numeri-non-sostenibili-non-li-reggiamo-UFyDxjawdpKFBdGvDgxAjM/pagina.html>.

profile of the actors involved, their power, positioning and behaviours? To answer this question, social network analysis (SNA) is used, to investigate actors' interactions and power dynamics.

Thirdly, this paper asks how policy-making, politics and public contestation of the asylum issue interact in shaping asylum governance. The “regulatory dimension” and the “public reaction dimension” of the Italian asylum crisis are often analysed separately and independently from each other (Castelli Gattinara, 2017: 319), but what are the interconnections between the two dimensions? What is the interplay between anti-immigration attitudes and anti-refugee campaigning, policy-making, politics and public contestation in the active constitution of the Italian asylum crisis? By dealing with these questions this paper will reveal the effects of the politicisation of asylum governance.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section describes the analytical framework and explains its potential to fill gaps in the existing literature. The second and third sections focus on case selection and methods. The fourth section investigates framing and sensemaking processes based on the insights from 43 interviews conducted in the Veneto region at the end of 2017, while the fifth section develops a social network analysis elaborating data collected through a questionnaire filled in by the same interviewees.

Opening the “black box” of Asylum Governance

This paper complements and challenges the existing literature on asylum governance and the refugee crisis in Italy. While many scholarly works have produced important insights on the features and outcomes of the asylum crisis (Castelli Gattinara, 2017; Gianfreda, 2017; D'Angelo 2018...) they share at least two common features. First, in line with most migration governance research, these works tend to conceptualize asylum-seeking migration as an exogenous factor, which is threatening and challenging the Italian asylum governance system. Secondly, they almost exclusively focus on (and tend to judge asylum governance by) the observed “outputs” of the governance process, such as the inefficiencies of asylum management and the increased political contestation over migration, while mostly neglecting to examine framing and decision-making processes, their characteristics and consequences. Some contributions extrapolate back from these “outputs” some assumptions about the nature of these processes, but they fail to examine the mechanisms within the system that produce these outputs. Anti-migrant public attitudes, for instance, are often assumed to influence both asylum politics – by contributing to the rising popularity of the far right and to the convergence of mainstream parties towards right-wing stances on immigration (Gianfreda, 2017: 8) – and asylum policies, by leading policy-makers to adopt a logic of exceptionality while responding to the asylum crisis (Castelli Gattinara, 2017: 328). The link between anti-migrant attitudes and actors' strategies, however, has not been properly investigated so far.

Conversely, this paper, first, aims to correct the tendency to treat asylum-seeking migration as a purely external shock to governance systems. It applies the perspective specified by Zolberg (1989), according to which migration is made visible as a social and political issue by borders and boundaries of political systems i.e. the way the political system is organized, who the actors are, and how they play a role in defining the issue. I will thus reverse the analytical focus of the existing literature and place more emphasis on endogeneity, by taking the constitutive effects of governance seriously and analysing the extent to which asylum-seeking migration is dependent on the actions and operational effects of the governance system.

Secondly, this paper will focus specifically on the context of decision, aiming to open the “black box” of asylum governance processes which took place during the Italian asylum crisis and to reveal its gears and functioning. Drawing from Brunsson's important contributions to organizational sociology (1985), I argue that, from an analytical and methodological point of view, it is not possible to extrapolate back from the outputs of a process to make assumptions about the nature of the process itself. Brunsson, indeed, questioned the prevalent rational model and the taken-for-granted, hierarchical, standard

decision-making theory to show, instead, the scope for “irrationality” in decision-making, due to the presence of complex and potentially contradictory pressures from external environments, paradoxes, tensions, contradictions, to which individuals and organizations must try to respond and that are not necessary evident in the outcome (see Boswell and Geddes, 2011). This is particularly true in situations of crisis and ambiguity – such as the one analysed in this paper – when interpretations of the effects of external environments powerfully drive decision-making preferences, and often lead to the decoupling of ideas and actions (or problems and choices) in the political process.

By developing an institutional and organisational perspective on governance, this paper focuses on this “missing middle”: how asylum governance as a structure, process and set of ideas is constituted and how it functions and operates through the actions and inactions of actors within the system. In other words, it adopts an actor-centred perspective, and considers the role played by all the actors involved (to different extents) in the governance of asylum at the regional and local levels, including both party actors and non-party actors (listed in Figure 1).

Figure 1. Actors involved in the Politics of Asylum Governance in the Veneto Region.

<u>PARTY ACTORS</u>	<u>NON-PARTY ACTORS</u>
Political Leaders	NGOs
Mayors/ <i>Assessori</i>	Anti-migrant committees
Regional Government	Trade Unions
MPs	Prefectures
Regional MPs	Civil Servants
	Service Providers
	Experts

More specifically, I will pay attention to actors’ understandings and decisions but also to the social and relational context in which they operate, and which influences their agency (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 4). Actors’ understandings of the causes and consequences of asylum-seeking migration and key risks and uncertainties associated with its governance, indeed, following Pierre’s definition of governance², necessarily drive asylum governance, its processes and relations, forming the basis for an answer to the two key questions that actors face when they have to take decisions in situations of crisis i.e. “what is going on?” and “what should be done next?”. The social and relational context in which actors operate, then, plays a key role in influencing how these understandings are developed and processed to shape actions. This context is also largely shaped by actors’ strategies and decisions: it is assumed, indeed, that actors in asylum governance are both “situated agents”, whose understandings, organization of experience and context for action are shaped by historical, social, political and organisational settings, and “strategic actors”, who have a certain capacity to shape and influence the context in which they operate with their decisions (Hay, 2002: 128).

To open the black box of asylum governance processes, therefore, this paper develops a “macro-micro-macro” approach (illustrated in Figure 2) inspired by Coleman’s approach to explain the behaviour of social systems (1990: 19). The approach is based on three components: a micro component, which aims to investigate individual purposive actions and their cognitive foundations; a micro-to-macro component, which – assuming that it is possible to explain the behaviour of social systems by looking at the behaviour of its parts – aims to assess the impact of these micro-foundations on the macro characteristics of the system i.e. on macro policy responses or “policy outputs”; and a macro-to-micro component, which aims to investigate the impact of macro policy outputs on micro-level processes of frame emergence.

² According to Pierre (2000), governance possesses a dual meaning – i.e. the “conceptualization of the effects of change in underlying social systems” and “attempts to steer, manage or coordinate these effects”.

To assess micro-level asylum governance mechanisms, I draw concepts and ideas from two largely separate literatures that have addressed the process by which the meaning of events is constructed, negotiated and translated into action in a social context: the framing perspective and the sensemaking approach. Framing theories are often applied in political science, although most of the literature examines “frames of communication” (Urso, 2018; Gianfreda, 2017), and mostly neglects “frames in thought” i.e. the “micro” individual cognitive dimension of the framing process (Scheufele, 1999: 106). Conversely, I specifically focus on “cognitive frames” to extrapolate the set of dimensions that drive individuals’ processing of information and understanding of events and that affect their moral evaluations, causal interpretations and articulation of solutions (Entman, 1993: 52).

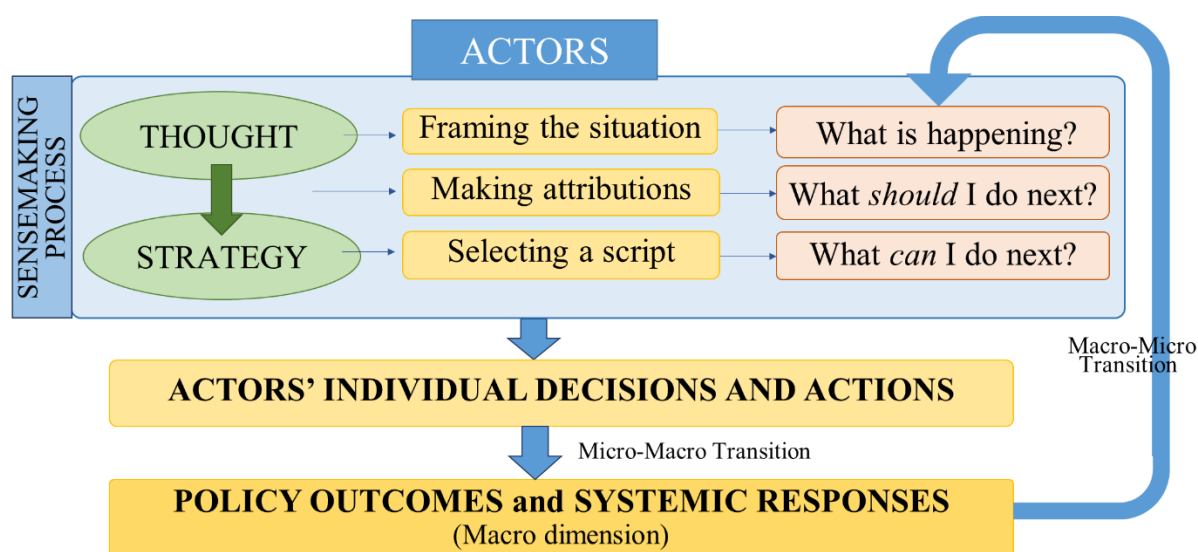
The sensemaking approach has been mostly developed in organizational studies (Weick, 1995; 2001) and emphasizes the social psychological and epistemological processes by which actors form an understanding of the situations they find themselves in and assign meaning to novel, unexpected or confusing events (Mills et al., 2010: 183). Applying concepts and ideas from this second approach seems particularly relevant to study asylum governance in the context of the Italian refugee crisis: sensemaking, indeed, is specifically salient in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty, when a personal jolt, shock or break of routine (such as a sudden increase of asylum-seeking flows and the need to organize migrant reception across the territory), violating expectancies, requires individuals to develop some sort of sense regarding what they are up against, what their own position is relative to what they sense, and what they need to do (Weick, 1999: 42).

Fiss and Hirsch (2005: 30) explain that the framing and sensemaking perspectives are ontologically, methodologically and “conceptually compatible”: while framing is mainly concerned with thought, sensemaking addresses both the two key questions that individuals have to face in situations of crisis, related not only to cognition – “what is happening?” – but also to action – “what should be done next?” (Mills et al., 2010: 183). It also allows to account for the importance of the wider organizational context where the process of meaning construction occurs. Following Bird and Osland (2005: 125), I will thus investigate framing and sensemaking together, by analysing: a) how political actors in Veneto frame the situation; b) how they make attributions or assign meaning to this situation; and c) the script they select, based on these understandings, to guide their actions or inactions. Importantly, while most of the literature in organizational studies tends to merely focus on decisions as the main outcome of the sensemaking process, I will also focus on indecisions and strategic issue-avoidance.

Assessing the implications of these micro-level mechanisms at the macro level, requires investigating actors’ relations and their power and influence with the purpose of understanding how the governance system, its processes and dynamics work and evolve. In the second part of my analysis I will thus adopt a quasi-sociological approach to SNA, focused on actor’s roles and understandings, to specify the composition of the regional asylum governance network, identify some of its key features and “relational aspects” (Geddes and Taylor, 2016: 590) and analyse how beliefs and actions of individuals within networks are located within the social and political context of network relations. Assuming that power within the governance network is associated with actors’ capacity to direct and control flows of information and understandings (Castells 2009), I will explore the different forms of power that actors exert within the network and the extent to which actors mobilise to activate the network’s relational potential.

Examining the macro-micro transition, finally, requires assessing the impact of macro policy outputs (local asylum policies, political competition and anti-migrant protests) on processes of frame emergence. While an in-depth assessment of frame emergence goes beyond the scope of this paper, I use insights from framing theories (particularly: Druckman, 2011), to draw some plausible conclusions on these processes.

Figure 2. The Analytical Framework.



The Veneto region

While the claim made by this paper is primarily conceptual and methodological, the approach developed is applied to the case of the Veneto region in Italy, a powerful heuristic case (Eckstein, 1973), selected for its extremely high explanatory value, which allows to illustrate the value of the conceptual and methodological claim made.

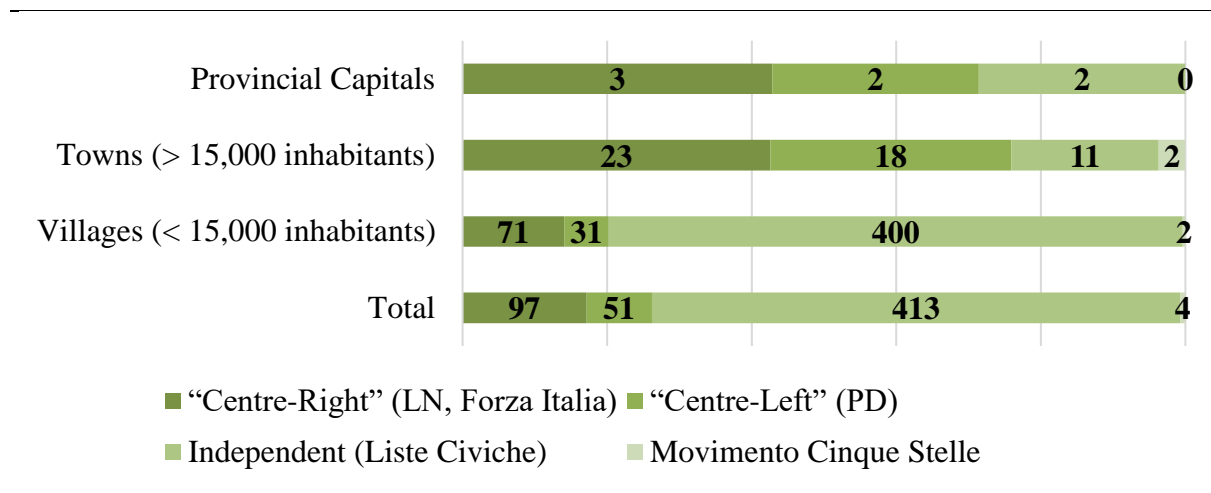
It represents an ideal case to understand how the strategies of political actors constituted asylum governance and shaped the asylum crisis for at least three reasons.

First, Veneto is a great case for its political culture and tradition and the actors involved in the regional governance of asylum. One of the wealthiest regions in Italy, it is characterized by a strong sense of regional identity and, since the early 1990s, its small and medium sized towns, characterized by relatively high levels of migration, represent the strongholds of the Lega Nord (LN), which became the dominant party of the region after it gained the governorship in 2010 and progressively relegated Berlusconi's Forza Italia to a marginal position in the "centre-right" coalition which governs the region since the early 1990s. While the LN's ideology is traditionally best defined as "regionalist populist" (McDonnell, 2006) and "anti-system" (Hepburn, 2009), since the early 2000s its leaders radicalised the party's position on immigration, increasingly framed as a threat to the survival of the culture and identity of northern Italians. This anti-immigration stances became even more central in the LN's propaganda and ideology under the more recent leadership of Matteo Salvini, who dismissed the regionalist element the LN's ideology (still recognised, however, by regional leaders and party elites structured and rooted in the North) and turned it to "an empty form of nativist nationalism" (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 645).

Importantly, the heuristic value of the case is increased by the significant political variation within the region (Figure 3). The dominant presence of the LN in Veneto, indeed, was partially contrasted by the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), which in 2017 controlled a significant number of towns and cities. The party is the product of the merger between former communists and former progressive Christian democrats, who are the vast majority of party representatives in the region, and its leader Matteo Renzi was particularly appealing to moderate northern middle-class during the first half of his mandate (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017). Furthermore, a significant number of municipalities in the region was governed, in 2017, by independent Mayors, supported by so called "liste civiche", and not affiliated to any of the dominant national parties. These mayors are "fringe actors", which can be

distinguished from traditional party actors for their different eligibility to government i.e. for not having any aspiration to govern at the national level.

Figure 3. Number of Venetian municipalities led by the different parties in early 2017.

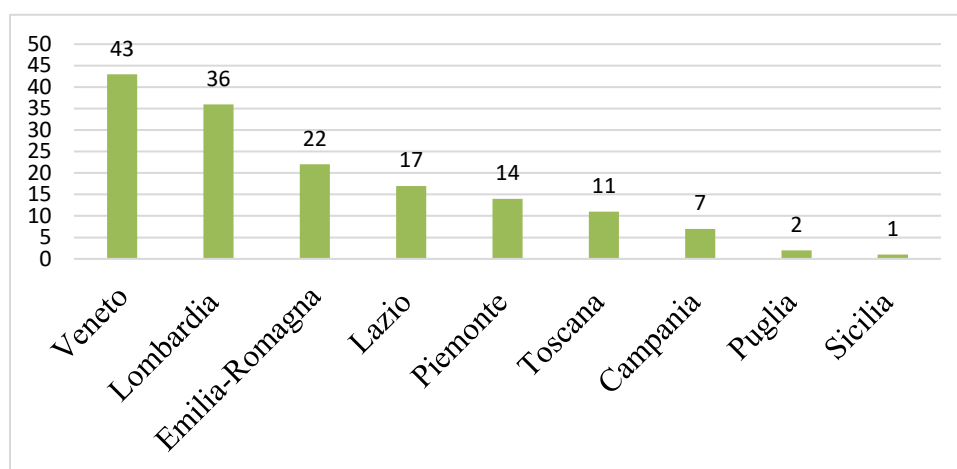


Source: www.comuniverso.it

The second reason is related to the exposure of the region to the asylum issue and the high levels of opposition to asylum-seekers' reception. Extreme right street-based movements such as Forza Nuova and Casapound, during the asylum crisis, were particularly active in anti-refugee campaigning (Lunaria, 2017), while many anti-migrant local committees were constituted throughout the region by private citizens and, sometimes, members of the extreme right. As shown in Figure 4, the region was characterized, in 2016, by the highest number of anti-migrant protests of the whole country. Importantly, ten interviews conducted, as part of a wider study (Pettrachin, 2019), with high level officials in the Ministry of Interior and other national decision-makers in early 2018 revealed that this high level of political contestation in Veneto had powerfully influenced their perceptions and understandings of the asylum crisis and, ultimately, their policy choices. The former Interior Minister Minniti himself declared to "La Repubblica" in August 2017 that it was the raising pressure coming from Mayors and other local authorities and their concerns over asylum management that made him conclude that the national asylum system could not absorb more asylum-seekers and that new restrictive policies on immigration were necessary³.

³ Source: https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/08/29/news/minniti_sui_migranti_ho_temuto_per_la_tenuta_democratica_paese_-174164861/.

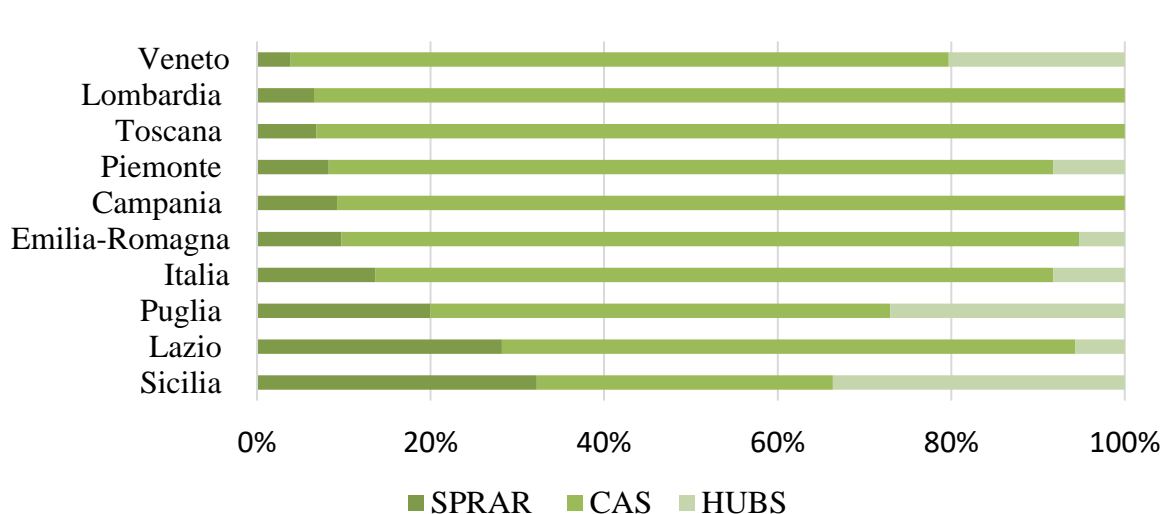
Figure 4. Number of Anti-Migrant Protests in the Nine Biggest Italian Regions in 2016.



Source: Lunaria, 2017

The third reason, finally, is related to the weakness of the regional reception system, compared to those of other Italian regions. In 2017, indeed, Veneto was characterized by a very unequal dispersal model: only 290 out of 571 municipalities in the region were hosting asylum-seekers, while 121 of them hosted a share of asylum-seekers which was higher than the target threshold established in the agreement signed in 2016 by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) and the Ministry of Interior. In the same year, among the nine biggest Italian regions, Veneto also had the lowest percentage of asylum-seekers hosted in the SPRAR system – the structured national reception system organized around small reception structures directly managed by local authorities – while the vast majority of them was hosted in emergency centres, under the control of the prefectures, the local representatives of the Minister of Interior. These centres include the so-called Centres of Extraordinary Reception (CAS), structures managed by private actors, and the so called “regional hubs”, huge first reception centres permanently hosting hundreds or, in some cases, more than a thousand asylum-seekers (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Asylum-seekers in different types of reception centres, in the nine biggest Italian regions (2017).



These reasons make Veneto a case with a very high heuristic value, with the potential to offer real insights into the politics of governance. While it is not representative of the entire country, it is not only an insightful case to show the illustrative and ground-breaking value of the approach developed in this paper, but the study is also replicable in other regions and contexts. A cross-regional comparison goes beyond the scope of this single paper, although this research is part of a wider study which will develop this method applied to other regions as well (Pettrachin, 2019).

Methods

The paper draws on 43 interviews conducted in Veneto in November 2017, with actors from all the categories mentioned in Figure 3 (the sample of interviewees is detailed in Table A1 in the annex). The interviews were semi-structured but also included a structured questionnaire for the SNA, which asked respondents to identify the actors with whom they interact and to estimate the frequency and intensity of these interactions.

The subsample of party-actors includes: 1) five actors affiliated to the right-wing LN; 2) seven actors from the centre-left PD; 3) eight fringe centre-left and centre-right actors; 4) four fringe right-wing actors. These four groups of interviewees all include mayors (or deputy mayors) from at least one provincial capital, one town and one village, and one or more national MPs, with the only exception of the fourth group, which includes the independent mayor of a small village, one independent regional MP, and two local leaders of the extreme-right “Forza Nuova”. The categorization of fringe actors as “centre-left”, “centre-right” or “right-wing” is established using, as criteria, the definition of actors themselves as such; the past membership to a party; the external support received by one or more parties at local elections.

The material collected through the 43 interviews have been supplemented by an extensive document analysis. Insights from other sources – such as available data and information on mobilizations (Lunaria, 2017) and on the role of local media in shaping narratives on asylum in the Veneto region (Tronchin Di Pasquale, 2017) – have been also used, particularly to assess the macro-micro component of the analysis.

Passive, defensive and proactive approaches to “public opinion” in the Veneto region

The rest of this paper applies the micro-macro-micro approach illustrated in Figure 2 to analyse the governance of asylum in Veneto in 2016-2017. This section focuses on the micro-level component of the analysis, examining how political actors frame the effects of the asylum-seeking flows in the region, how they make attributions on how they should deal with such effects, the script they select to guide their actions during the asylum crisis, and how these scripts shape their actions and decisions.

Importantly, when asked about their perceptions of the effects of asylum-seeking flows in their region or municipality, almost all interviewees focused on their (negative) effects on local public opinion. The analysis that follows shows, therefore, that actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration act as a key driving force of political actors’ strategies and actions in Veneto. It also reveals, however, that different groups of party-actors make sense of (and responded to) these local anti-migrant attitudes differently.

The PD and fringe centre-left and centre-right actors

It is interesting to first focus on actors who decided *not to oppose* the creation of reception centres for asylum-seekers: PD politicians and independent centre-left or centre-right politicians. Interestingly, although these actors all agree that the local population opposed the arrival and dispersal of asylum-seekers, they seem to frame the situation very differently (Table 1).

Table 1. How PD Actors and Independent Centre-Left/Centre-Right Actors Make Sense of Public Attitudes to Asylum.

		PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	INDEPENDENT ACTORS (centre-left and centre-right)
SENSEMAKING PROCESS	1. Framing the situation	Population mobilised against asylum-seekers, due to “innate fears”	Population mobilised against asylum-seekers, because it is uninformed or misinformed
	2. Making Attributions	Anti-migrant attitudes cannot be modified by any political action	Anti-migrant attitudes can be modified through information campaigns
	3. Selecting a Script	Adopting a passive stance or acting maintaining a low profile	Openly taking action to counter citizens' misperceptions and to inform the population
ACTIONS:		«Non opposition» to Prefects' decisions BUT delegation of responsibilities to the Prefectures (ambiguity)	Active cooperation with Prefects, networking and burden-sharing initiatives

All the PD mayors and MPs interviewed, indeed, provide very tense accounts of the anti-migrant demonstrations that took place in the region since 2015. An MP explains that:

In early 2017 the phenomenon was exploding in our hands, because the population in this region was hostile and could not be kept under control anymore (...). The entire regional community was rebelling and organizing demonstrations against the asylum-seekers (PD MP).

Importantly, most of the PD actors interviewed forecast, at the end of 2017, that these tensions and intolerance will keep raising in the future and are “very pessimist” about any possible change in this trend because, as a Deputy Mayor explained, “people have a really *ancestral* [i.e. innate, not modifiable] fear of migrants”. Another MP explains that “this is an unequal battle against the worst ideas ever” while a Mayor admits that “people’s perceptions do represent a problem of great magnitude, for which it is hard to find any solution”.

All centre-left or centre-right independent actors, conversely, seem to put less emphasis on these anti-migrant demonstrations, mostly perceived by them as the initiative of marginalized far-right groups. More importantly, they seem to think that anti-migrant attitudes are not the outcome of “innate fears” but, rather, of more contingent issues, such as ignorance, misinformation, unawareness of the complexity of the phenomenon or the influence of anti-migrant propaganda campaigns by local and national media.

These different understandings of the situation around them seem to have significantly influenced the attributions that these two groups of actors make and the script that they select to guide their actions during the refugee crisis.

PD mayors and MPs tend to perceive public opinion as a harsh constraint to their own actions. An MP admits that public opinion has been “breathing down her neck”, causing her many troubles and preventing her from freely expressing her thoughts. Three PD MPs refer to their participation to local talk shows as destabilizing experiences, mainly due to “violent” questions or comments by citizens from the audience. As a Mayor explains, “even if the effects of the arrival of asylum-seekers have been much

less significant than the perceived ones, we have to make the hard effort to provide concrete responses to such perceptions”.

These evaluations, thus, produce decision-making preferences that are powerfully driven by this understanding of the effects of anti-immigration sentiments and they ultimately lead PD politicians to adopt a passive stance towards public opinion. As an MP explains:

Because of the fear to be unpopular we have been really passive in front of the phenomenon (...). It was the summer 2015, the number of asylum-seekers was significantly increasing, and I could breathe this atmosphere of intolerance, of very strong rejection, everywhere. I stopped going to public events because it was a massacre for us. I was really impressed that we were all passive in front of such a wrong cultural message (...). But it was not easy, because as a politician you are often influenced by consensus and popularity (PD MP).

In the few instances in which PD actors have to act – because the situation requires their intervention or because the passive stance adopted clashes with their values or their institutional identity – this same script requires PD actors to act adopting the lowest possible profile. A Deputy Mayor thus admitted that, in spite of the Mayor telling her to “stay away from the reception centres”, she decided to provide some help “under the table”.

The sensemaking process described above seems to produce an enduring tension between, on the one hand, the willingness of PD actors to cooperate with national authorities and be welcoming to asylum-seekers (which, as a Deputy Mayor puts it, “is the mission of a centre-left administration”) and, on the other hand, the fear of the negative reaction of the population. Such tension seems to produce “ambiguity” in their actions (Ansell et al., 2017: 45) and to lead to decoupled or loosely coupled links between problems and choices. Therefore, most local authorities controlled by the PD, during the refugee crisis, decided *not to oppose* Prefects’ decisions to send asylum-seekers to their municipalities but refused to take any direct responsibility on the issue and to be involved by any means in the decisions taken. They were also very keen to inform the population that any decision on the matter could only be attributed to the Prefectures and often publicly complained about Prefects’ decisions. A PD Mayor, who explains during the interview that the arrival of “a small number” of asylum-seekers in his town “had not had any significant impact”, had declared to a local newspaper, just a few months before, that he would have fiercely opposed the arrival of other asylum-seekers because the town could not have borne more migrants.

Finally, this ambiguity also means that political and symbolic considerations play a key role in decision-making, characterised by an emphasis on being seen doing something, rather than on actions necessarily achieving their intended effects. The involvement of asylum-seekers in voluntary, socially useful, unpaid activities by many PD local administrations in the region is a key example of the importance of this. Initiatives of this kind have been developed in most of the PD-led municipalities (but also by some independent and LN mayors), designed to be highly visible to the local population, and with the explicit aim to respond to the harsh social tensions perceived around them.

Independent centre-left and centre-right actors, conversely, convinced that anti-migrant attitudes are the product of ignorance and misperceptions, think that, as such, these misperceptions can be contrasted and modified and that the local population must be properly informed. All these actors, therefore, adopt a proactive approach towards public opinion, acting in various ways to inform citizens and counter their misperceptions, through the organization of public meetings, the involvement of experts, the distribution of pamphlets with detailed information on the local reception system, and the organization of events to introduce the asylum-seekers to the local population. This involved both centre-left and centre-right independent mayors of small villages and big cities, and municipalities with different types of reception centres. As a Deputy Mayor explains, “we moved from platitudes and destroyed them one by one”.

Importantly, coherently with this approach, these mayors also decided to be actively involved in the organization of the reception system and to closely cooperate with the Prefects to improve the efficiency

of the dispersal scheme. They thus promoted networks and burden-sharing measures, organized meetings for the discussion of good practices and tried to launch innovative solutions to improve the Italian asylum system. The administration of Belluno decided to actively coordinate the dispersal and reception of the asylum-seekers in the entire province (going beyond its formal competences). The Mayor of Santorso involved other villages of the province in an innovative network of municipalities affiliated to the SPRAR system, which inspired the dispersal model adopted by the Minister of Interior in 2016.

The LN and Fringe Right-wing Actors

On the other side of the political spectrum, actors affiliated to the LN and independent right-wing actors both frame migration mainly in terms of law and order. However, again, their analyses of the effects of asylum-seeking flows on the local population significantly differ (Table 2).

Table 2. How LN Actors and Independent Right-wing/Far Right Actors Make Sense of Public Attitudes to Asylum.

		LEGA NORD	INDEPENDENT ACTORS (right/far right)
SENSEMAKING PROCESS	1. Framing the situation	Citizens feel insecure	The local population is under threat (migrants commit crimes, bring diseases etc.)
	2. Making Attributions	People's concerns need to be represented	The local population needs to be protected
	3. Selecting a Script	Steering into citizens' will: (in)acting strategically	Taking action to defend the local population (ideology-driven approach)
ACTIONS:		Inactions (rejection of any responsibility in the reception system) OR «defensive» actions (protests against new reception centres, mainly symbolic)	Initiatives to «make the reception system explode»

All LN interviewees explain that the main effect of the arrival of asylum-seekers in Veneto has been – more than a real increase in crimes – an increased perception of insecurity and fear of the local population, which resulted in social tensions, protests and a widespread hostility towards asylum-seekers. Independent right-wing and far-right politicians, conversely, seem to be convinced that the local population is “under threat” because of the arrival of the asylum-seekers. Unlike LN politicians, they do not refer to mere perceptions but to real events, real crimes (drug deal, thefts, prostitution, murders, rapes...) and public health issues. Also, some of these actors underlined that the local population, under threat, is unable to appropriately react to what is happening. Both groups of actors also mention that the sudden arrival of the asylum-seekers was perceived as a threat to the strong local identity of the region, but again, while LN actors refer to an impact on perceptions more than on reality, independent right-wing actors point to events that require urgent interventions.

The attributions that LN politicians make about the situation are strongly influenced by the signals and cues about citizens' perceptions of insecurity that they pick up from their environment. Their actions, therefore, seem to be mainly aimed at giving voice to these widespread concerns. All LN interviewees agree, indeed, that public attitudes do influence their actions: as a member of the regional government puts it, “undoubtedly, the feelings of the population have an influence on our mood and

considerations”. In addition to that, they are eager to state that their main aim is to give representation to citizens’ perceptions and to bring them “within the institutions”. Interestingly, by giving voice to peoples’ concerns, LN politicians think that they can also contain social tensions.

These attributions seem to create scope for decision-making preferences that are powerfully driven by such understanding of the effects of anti-immigration sentiments (as in the case of the PD), but also for a strategic approach to actions and a defensive rather than proactive stance towards public opinion. This strategic approach requires them to take different courses of action in different situations.

In politically salient situations, i.e. when actions can have an impact on the perceptions of the local population, therefore, LN politicians tend to steer into what they perceive to be the citizens’ will. In most cases this leads to inactions rather than actions. All the institutions controlled by the Lega, indeed, tried to avoid any direct involvement in the organization of the regional reception system. The party intimated to its own mayors not to take part in the working tables organized by the Prefectures that should have coordinated the dispersal of asylum-seekers within each province, and to withdraw their affiliation with the ANCI, thus preventing its regional branch to play any significant role in the coordination of the reception system. The regional government also decided not to take any responsibility in the organization of the reception system, unlike other regional governments in Italy. The LN Governor of the region declared, during an audition at the Chamber of Deputies that “the Veneto Region is not willing to contribute to the organization of the reception system” and explained the motivation behind this decision by stating that the government “is concerned that identifying solutions downstream [at the local level] would prevent any solution of the problem upstream [i.e. stopping the flows in Africa]”⁴.

In other cases, this strategic attitude seems to require LN politicians to take action in order to distance themselves from events or situations that risk undermining the support they have from the local population. Most LN interviewees explain that they keep informing the population of their municipality that they are not responsible for the arrival of asylum-seekers and that their institutional position does not allow them to have any impact on these matters.

Finally, when the stakes are high, this strategic approach seems to require LN politicians to take action with the aim to give voice to people’s concerns and prove their empathy for the local population. Crucially, when mayors become aware, mainly through informal channels, that the Prefecture is considering the possibility to send some asylum-seekers to their village, they organize demonstrations against the creation of the new reception centre, they release threatening interviews to local newspapers, and put pressure on the Prefect, the service provider or the private individuals willing to rent their properties for that purpose. LN mayors, MPs and the Governor of the Region, thus, all supported, participated in or (sometimes) organized anti-migrant demonstrations in the region. The interview material suggests, however, that the decision to join or organize these demonstrations is a defensive or strategic – i.e. aimed at maintaining or gaining consensus – rather than a proactive, ideologically driven, action.

In situations which, conversely, are not perceived as politically salient, LN politicians seem to behave in a rather different way. LN mayors, for instance, never withdrew from the SPRAR system, if the municipality had joined the system during a previous centre-left administration (often, in contrast to what they had announced during the electoral campaign). Most city and regional officials explained, moreover, that the regional government did not refuse to take an active role on health-related issues that are under its own competences, providing health care to all asylum-seekers. Overall, therefore, as in the case of PD politicians, political and symbolic considerations seem to play a key role in decision-making, which leads to an emphasis on being seen doing something, rather than on actions necessarily achieving their intended effects. And this is the reason why independent right-wing politicians in the region harshly criticise the LN for not having organized a proper, structured opposition to national asylum policies and

⁴ Source: <http://www.camera.it/leg17/202?idCommissione=69&calendario=false>.

for not having provided any legal and administrative support to local administrations that tried to develop anti-migrant local policies (i.e. measures against begging, imposition of taxes on asylum-seekers or cooperatives etc.). According to a local leader of “Forza Nuova”, the active involvement of the Lega Nord in local anti-migrant citizens’ committees undermined the success of their activities.

In line with their perception that the local population is under threat, conversely, independent right-wing actors seem to be convinced that, through their political activities, they must “protect” public opinion, taking action for the sake of their people. In the village of Albettone, for instance, the local Council adopted in 2015 a resolution aimed to empower the Mayor – an independent politician recently affiliated to the far-right Fratelli d’Italia (and never supported by the Lega) – to adopt “any measure to protect the community” against “risks connected to the security and the possible spread of diseases or plagues”⁵.

Interestingly, all the actors interviewed in this fourth group, explain that their harsh anti-immigration stances and actions are not influenced by public opinion and that, had the issue been less politically relevant, they would have acted in the same way. This seems to suggest that their actions are more ideology-driven than consensus-driven: even when their actions meet negative feedbacks from the citizens, indeed, this seems not to have an impact on choices and strategies.

Coherently with this very proactive ideology-driven stance, all these actors have actively developed initiatives, administrative acts, resolutions, aimed at providing concrete responses to the local population – e.g. by opposing the creation of new reception centres – but also, more broadly, at countering national asylum policies. A group of independent right-wing regional MPs promoted some regional resolutions aimed at pushing the regional government to adopt a much tougher stance on asylum-related issues⁶. The right-wing Mayor of Albettone declared that, in case the neighbouring villages had accepted to host some asylum-seekers, he would have built a wall along the border between the two villages to “protect his people”⁷ and that, had the Prefect dared to turn some unused public buildings in his village into a reception centre, he would have “blocked the windows to make the buildings be condemned”. The independent mayor of Pastrengo launched a network of local authorities to protest against the incentives and privileges granted to those municipalities that decided to join the SPRAR system: the initiative aimed, as a mayor interviewed explains, at “making the reception system explode” and catching the government’s attention, but its promoters failed to involve a sufficient number of local authorities and to get the support of the LN. The protest movement Forza Nuova – as also other extreme-right movements – promoted regular “security patrols” around some reception centres and organized several anti-migrant protests. These initiatives led to very tense relationships between these actors and the Prefectures.

The impact of sensemaking processes and actors’ strategies on policy outcomes and responses

This section builds on findings from the previous paragraphs to explore the micro-macro and macro-micro components of the analysis. The micro-level component of the analysis conducted so far, in sum, has outlined how actors affiliated to the two dominant parties adopted a more strategic and consensus-oriented approach, while fringe independent actors adopted a more ideological and/or pragmatic approach, and that in both cases the approaches adopted are largely and meaningfully constituted by their different understandings of public attitudes on asylum.

⁵ <http://www.comune.albettone.vi.it/zf/index.php/atti-amministrativi/delibere/dettaglio/table-delibere-public-page/49/atto/GTIRRNA--H>.

⁶ http://www.consiglio Veneto.it/crvportal/attisp/RIS/Anno_2017/RIS_0038/testo_presentato.html.

⁷ <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2015/07/20/un-muro-in-paese-per-bloccare-i-rifugiati-lultima-sceriffo14.html>.

Actors, and their understandings and strategies, however, are not equally powerful: framing and sensemaking processes in multi-institutional settings are subject to power relations and associated inequalities, with the effect that some understandings are far more powerful than others (Mills et al., 2010: 183). The following paragraphs will therefore examine actors' relations and power. Using SNA, I will thus, first, specify the composition of the regional asylum governance network, its constitution and "relational aspects" and explore power relations therein. Secondly, relying on both these findings and on additional insights from semi-structured interviews and policy documents, I will assess the impact of actors' actions and relations on broader asylum policy responses in Veneto and the organization of the regional reception system. Thirdly, I will focus on the macro-micro component of the analysis, drawing some plausible conclusions on the impact of policy outputs on processes of frame emergence.

SNA - Networks

Figure 6 shows the asylum governance network in the Veneto region, elaborated with the Gephi software. More precisely, the graph shows a condensed visualisation of the network, where all nodes of the same type (i.e. actors with the same role and political affiliation) have been collapsed into a single node representing the actors' group. In this figure, ties indicate the existence of discussions between the two groups of actors on asylum-related issues, while the strength of ties depends on the frequency of exchanges between groups: the more intense the communication flow, the bolder the tie in the network illustration⁸. The overall network features suggest that the conversation is rather fragmented. Indeed, the density value (0.135), which indicates the proportion of existing ties in comparison to the total number of possible ties in a network, shows that less than fourteen per cent of possible ties are activated. Hence, interactions in the network tend to be carried on in a selective way.

SNA is a particularly useful tool to investigate power relations within the network. According to Castells (2009, 45) the ability of actors within networks to exercise control over others depends on two basic mechanisms, namely, first, "the ability to constitute network(s), and to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to it"; and, secondly, "the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources, while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation". He calls the holders of the first power position *programmers* and the holders of the second power position the *switchers*.

The size of the nodes in Figure 4 highlights *switchers*, the more central and relevant actors in the network, that have the "power to coordinate" and exert a function of intermediation between groups in the network (measured by the betweenness centrality, that is, the number of shortest paths from all the vertices to all the other vertices in the network that pass through the node in consideration). The figure clearly suggests that the main *switchers* in the network are service providers and anti-migrant committees (and, to a minor extent, the Prefecture). Importantly, those institutions that could have taken a leading role in coordinating and organizing the regional reception system, such as the regional government and regional institutions, the ANCI, the Prefecture of Venice and the Ministry of Interior, reach a very low score and occupy a marginal position in the network.

⁸ Nodes with less one single tie have been hidden from the picture.

Figure 6. Asylum Governance Network in Veneto. Edges indicate discussions between the actors. Weight indicates the frequency of exchange (measured on a scale of 1-4). The size of nodes (and labels) indicates their betweenness centrality⁹.

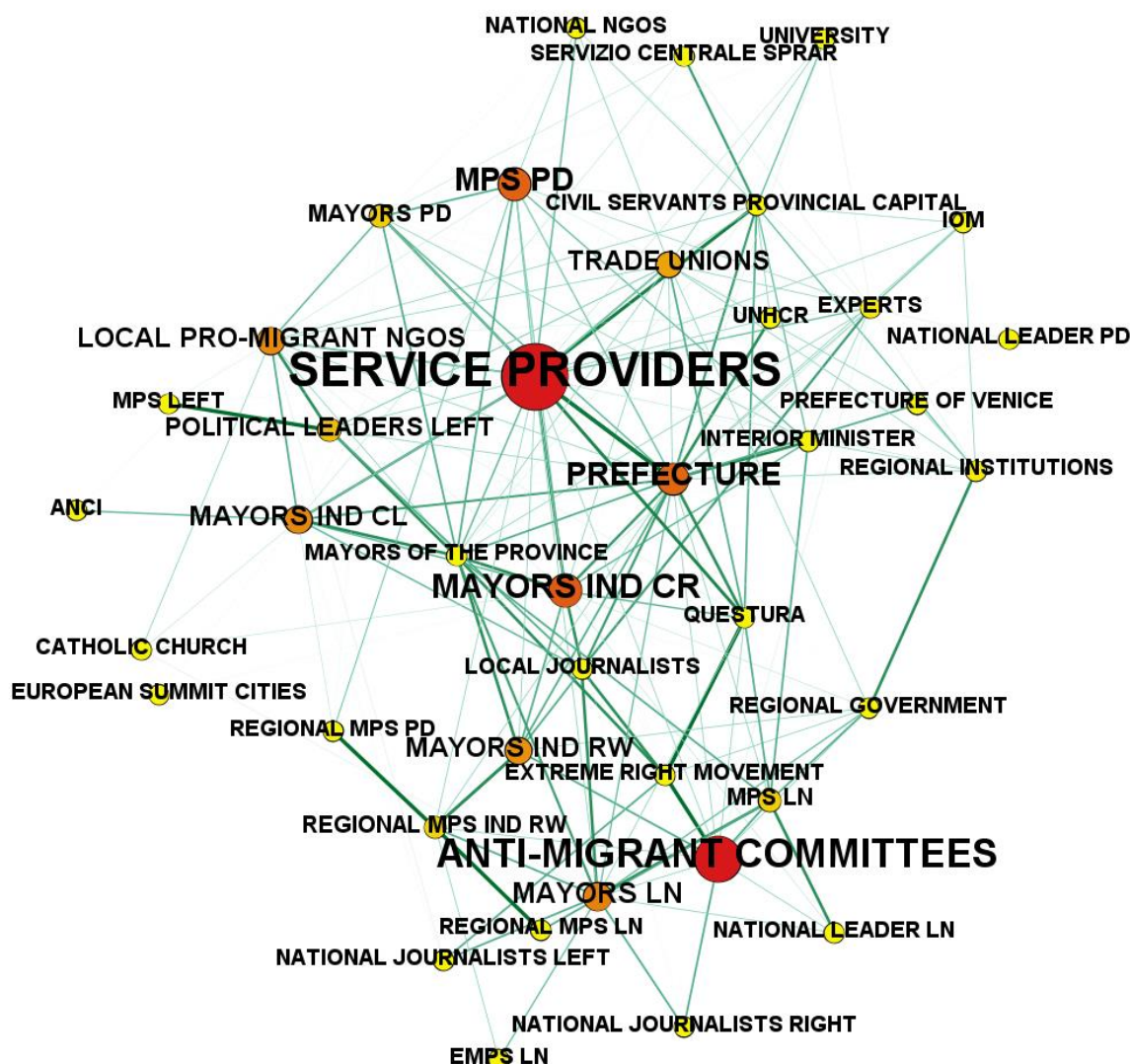


Figure 7, instead, highlights *programmers* in the governance network, that is those actors that enjoy the broader recognition within the network, measured by the in-degree (that is the number of the ingoing relations of the nodes). These are the actors that are potentially “capable of defining the substantive framework of the conversation” (Padovani and Pavan, 2016: 360) and thus of influencing other actors’ decisions. The software identifies seven *programmers*: the Ministry of Interior and its local branches, the Prefectures and the *Questure*; service providers; mayors; the regional government and local

⁹ “MAYORS IND CL” stands for centre-left independent mayors; “MAYORS IND CR” for centre-right independent mayors; “MAYORS IND RW” for right-wing independent mayors; “MAYORS OF THE PROVINCE” is a category introduced in the structured questionnaire to assess the interactions of each mayor, on average, with the other mayors of her province.

journalists. While service providers and local journalists are broad and heterogeneous groups of actors, it is important to underline, here, that 46 of the 61 cities/towns in 2016-2017 were controlled by either the LN (which also controlled the regional government) or the PD. These two parties, together with the Prefectures, are thus the main *programmers* of the regional asylum governance system.

Figure 7. Programmers in the governance network. Edges indicate existence of discussions between the actors. Weight indicates the frequency of interaction (measured on a scale of 1-4). The size of labels indicates the in-degree centrality⁸.

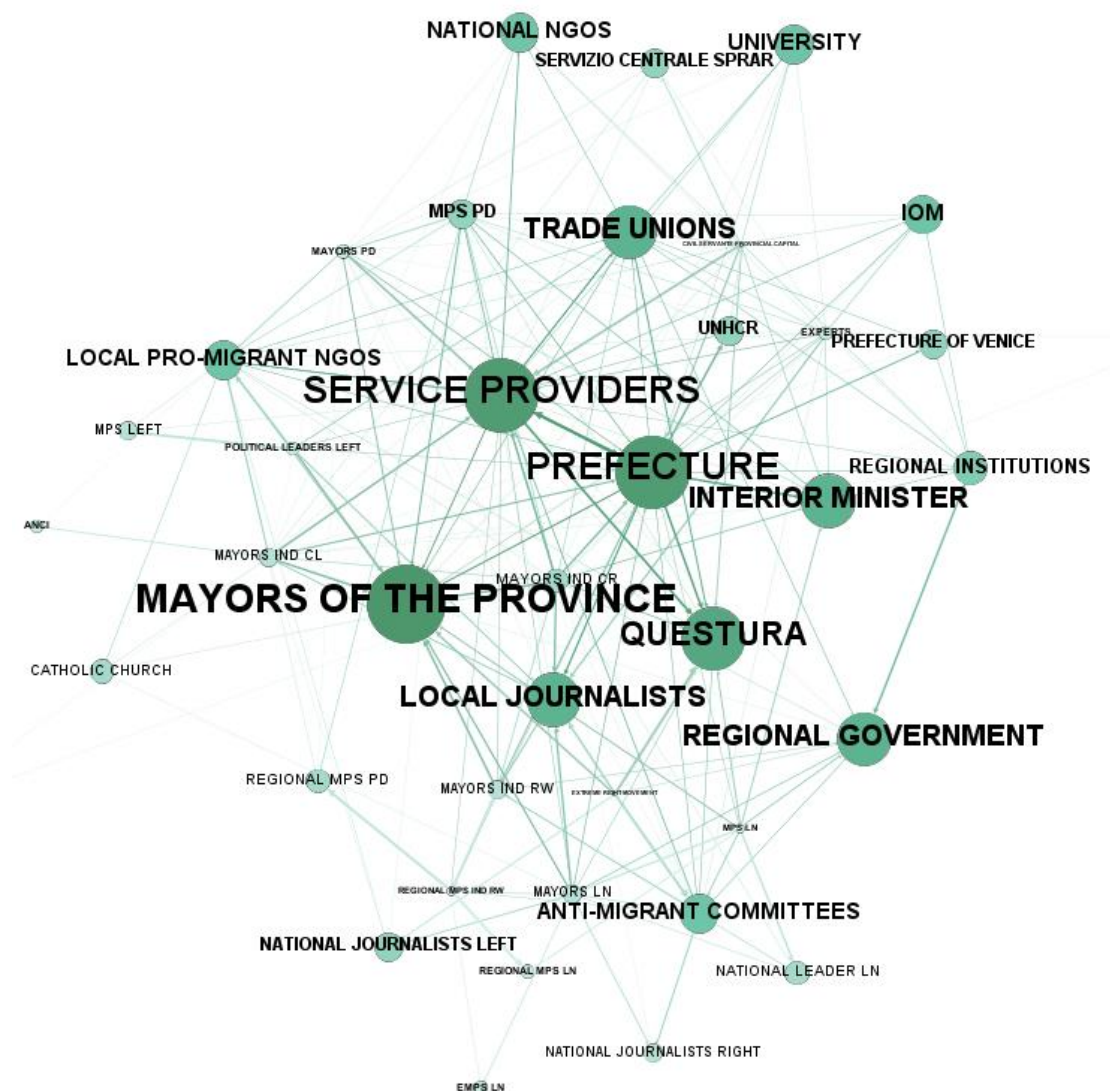
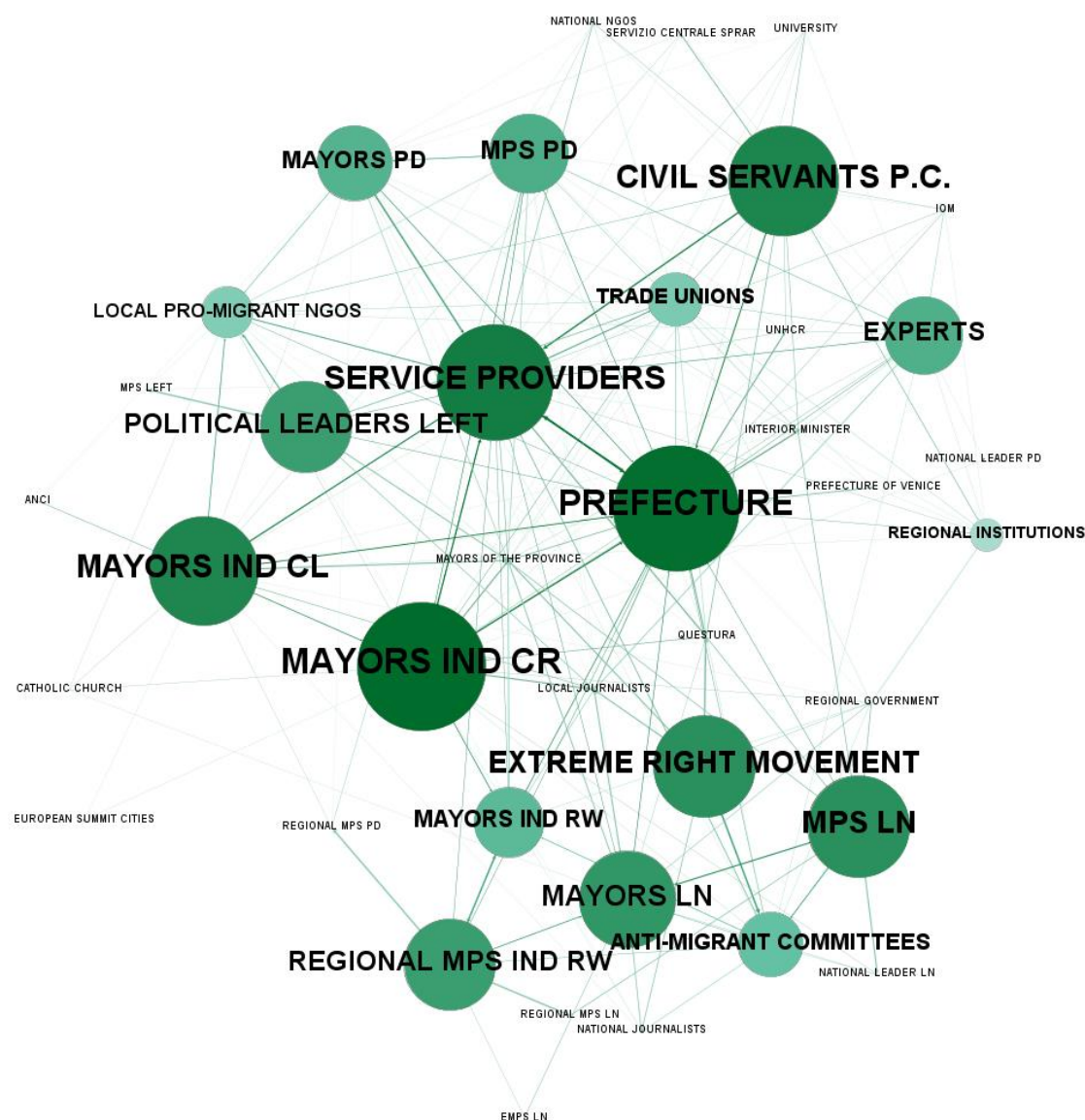


Figure 8, finally – where the size of nodes is proportional to their weighted out-degree centrality i.e. the number of outgoing relations of the nodes – shows the so-called *mobilisers* in the governance network, that is, actors that implement the network’s relational potential by reaching out in different directions. These are the actors that operate within the network with a broad understanding of both the actors involved and the issues at stake and that contribute “to interested actors’ perception and understanding of existing challenges and available solutions” (Padovani and Pavan, 2016: 360). The list of *mobilisers* mostly includes independent or fringe party-actors – a finding which seems coherent with the analysis on sensemaking conducted in the previous paragraph. Importantly, most of these *mobilisers* are neither *switchers* nor *programmers*, which means that, despite attempting to activate the network’s relational potential, they lack the power to have a real impact on understandings and the identification of solutions.

The only *mobilisers* that are also *programmers* and *switchers* are the Prefectures and service providers (which, however, is a heterogeneous group of actors with loose and sometimes conflicting relationships within themselves).

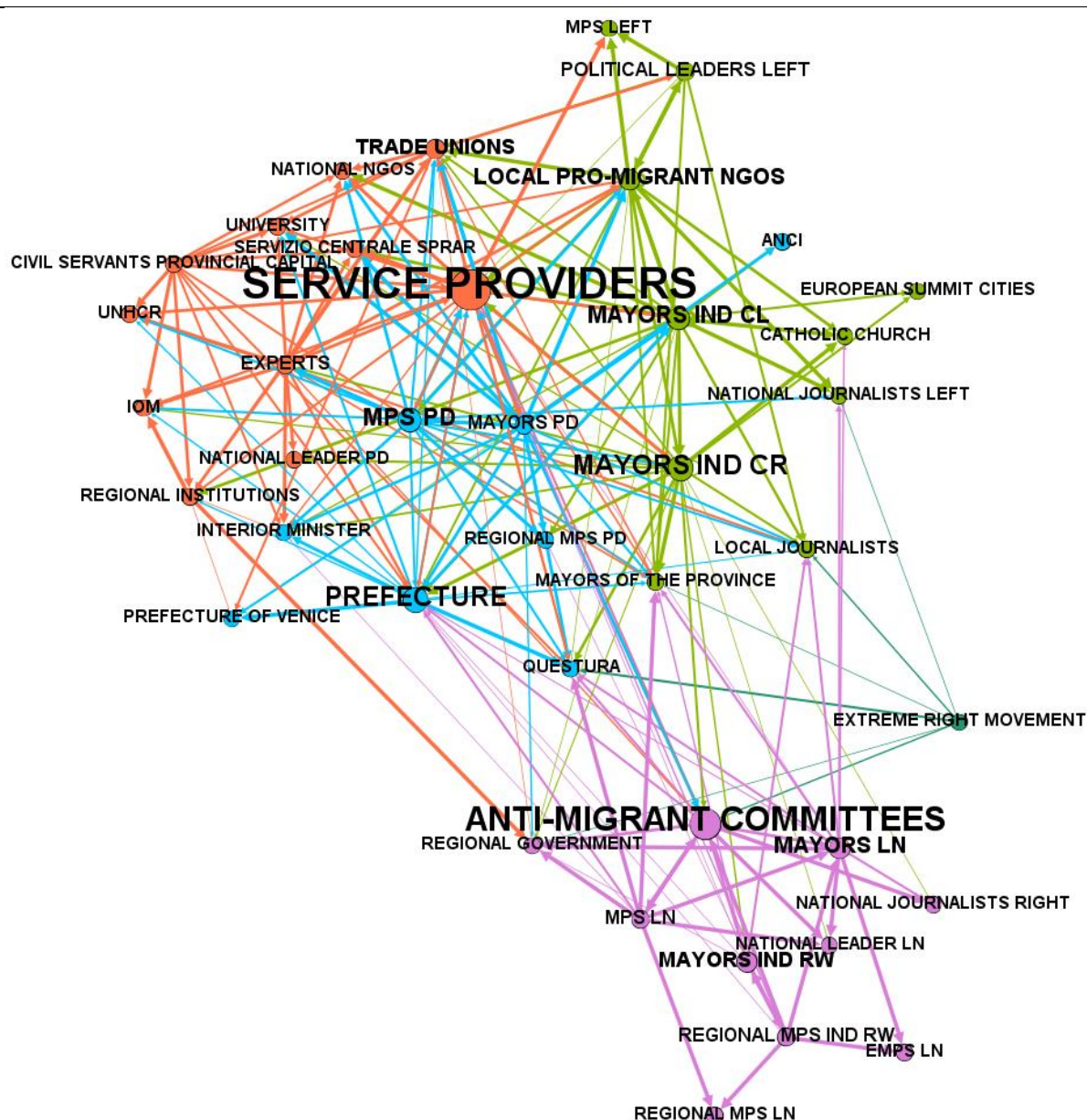
Figure 8. Mobilisers in the governance network. Edges indicate existence of discussions between the actors. Weight indicates the frequency of interaction. The size of labels indicates the weighted out-degree centrality⁸.



Before assessing the implications of these findings on asylum policy responses in Veneto, it is important to analyse and illustrate conflicts and alliances within the governance network. While Figure 6 above shows the existence and frequency of exchanges between actors and is blind to any divergence of views, Figure 9 shows the degree of similarity of the perspectives of actors that relate to one another (the bolder the tie, the higher the similarity of views between the actors). It also illustrates that the network can be compartmentalized into five sub-networks or clusters of actors (identified through the “community detection” algorithm of the software). Interestingly, four of these clusters correspond to the four groups of actors identified in the previous section: a blue cluster with actors affiliated to the PD; a green cluster

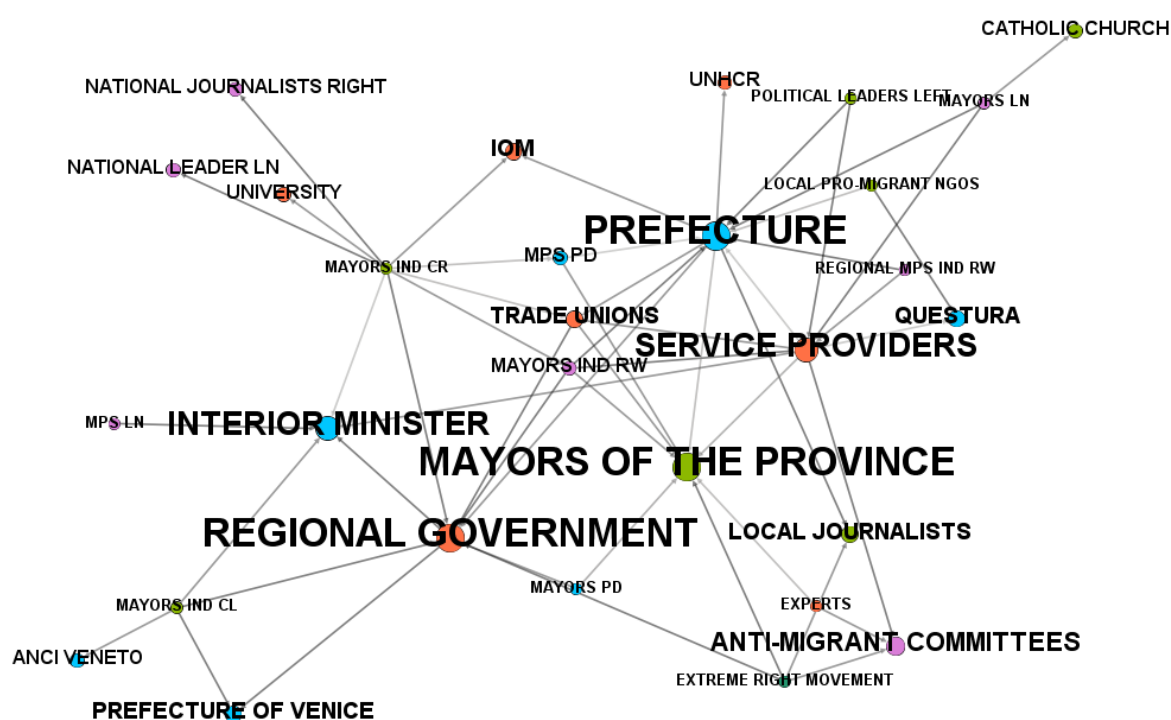
with independent centre-left and centre-right mayors and a number of advocates of migrant reception (left-wing politicians, local NGOs and the Catholic Church); a purple cluster with actors affiliated to the LN, the regional government and anti-migrant committees; and a dark green cluster formed by the extreme right “Forza Nuova” (the software places independent right-wing actors in the LN subnetwork, despite the different stances adopted towards public opinion underlined above). In addition, a fifth, orange cluster groups most of non-party actors, such as international and national organizations, experts, trade unions and service providers. Overall, Figure 9 shows that the network is significantly polarised between those groups of actors that accept the reception of migrants – and thus interact with service providers – and those groups of actors that refuse reception and form coalitions with anti-migrant local committees.

Figure 9. Asylum Governance Network in Veneto. Edges indicate discussions between the actors. Weight indicates the degree of similarity of views (measured on a scale of 1-5). The size of nodes (and labels) indicates their betweenness centrality. Colours indicate subnetworks⁸.



The many thin ties in the graph suggest a high divergence of views between (but also, sometimes, within) these clusters of actors. Figure 10 better illustrates conflicting views in the network and highlights those actors that engage in the highest number of conflicting interactions. Overall, the Figure suggests the existence of harsh political and institutional tensions between/towards institutions at all levels, including regional and national institutions, prefectures, and mayors (mostly: PD and LN Mayors). In particular, the central and active role of Prefectures in the governance system is harshly contested by actors from all clusters, with the only exception of PD actors (who, as mentioned above, tend to passively accept Prefects' decisions). This high level of institutional conflict seems consistent with the data collected through the semi-structured component of the interview. As an MP interviewed explains, in the region, on this issue, "there has been a crazy contention between different institutions, something I had never seen before". The centre-right mayor of a village hosting one of the huge hubs explained that the hubs have been the outcome of "the betrayal of some Veneto people by other Veneto people", while a local leader of Forza Nuova complained about the disproportional burden imposed on the southern side of his province, pointing to a plot supposedly organized by the local administrators of the provincial capital (controlled by the LN).

Figure 10. Conflicting Views in the Venetian Governance System. Edges indicate existence of discussions and divergent views between the actors (i.e. conflict). Weight indicates the degree of divergence. Size of nodes/labels indicates in-degree centrality⁸.



Impact on Policy Responses

The analyses of sensemaking and of actors' relations and power dynamics conducted so far has revealed five key features of the asylum governance network in the Veneto region. The network is very fragmented and polarized between actors that accept and oppose the reception of asylum-seekers. No institution took the lead in coordinating the governance system, with the role of *switchers* being left to service providers and anti-migrant committees. The most powerful actors in the system (including the two dominant parties) were very passive and did not activate the network's relational potential. Most of

these responsibilities have been delegated to the Prefectures, the only powerful actor that acted as *mobiliser*, the active role of which is, however, harshly contested. Overall, the network is characterized by very high levels of conflict between different groups of actors.

These features provide very useful insights to understand why the regional reception system in the Veneto region is so fractured, weak and contested.

First, they clarify why the dispersal of asylum-seekers throughout the region is so unbalanced. Most local authorities, indeed, either did not actively cooperate with the Prefects in the organization of the dispersal system (the PD's approach) or actively opposed any dispersal plan that involved their municipality (the LN's approach). As an independent centre-left Mayor puts it: "local authorities in this region have played the Russian roulette, hoping that the asylum-seekers would have been sent to other municipalities". The regional branch of the ANCI, weakened by the decision of all LN mayors to leave the Association, also refused to take an active role in this process, unlike what happened in other Italian regions. As the President of the regional branch of the ANCI (the PD Mayor of Mirano) declared in 2017:

We are very sceptical about the dispersal scheme proposed in the agreement (*Piano di ripartizione*) between the Minister of Interior and the National ANCI (...). This dispersal model could solve the problem of having huge concentrations of asylum-seekers, but it would lead to social tensions in the municipalities where the rationale behind the dispersal itself is hardly accepted (Mariarosa Pavanello, President of ANCI Veneto)¹⁰.

Without any significant cooperation of mayors, of the regional government and the ANCI, the entire responsibility to organize the dispersal and reception of asylum-seekers was delegated to the Prefects, which had to carry out this job in a prevalently hostile environment. As two Deputy Prefects explain during the interviews, the widespread opposition of the local authorities in the region prevented the prefectures from shaping an efficient dispersal scheme and reception system. Interestingly, six of the actors interviewed made a comparison between the Venetian municipalities and the EU member states, both unable to fairly distribute asylum-seekers among themselves.

Secondly, the passive or defensive stances adopted by most actors towards public opinion clearly impacted on the decisions of the municipalities to join the SPRAR system, the structural national reception system, which requires a direct and visible involvement of the local municipality. The few municipalities that joined the system are mostly led by independent centre-left and centre-right mayors while – despite all PD members interviewed praising the SPRAR system as the best reception model available – most PD administrations in the region did not join the programme. When they joined, it was the outcome of the pressures of catholic NGOs and, overall, of a long process – a "painful delivery" as explained by a PD Deputy Mayor. Coherently with the approach adopted, no LN administration decided to join the SPRAR system, which, as mentioned above, was also the object of harsh criticism from independent right-wing actors.

Thirdly, the non-cooperation or fierce opposition towards any dispersal measure of so many local municipalities forced the prefects to send most asylum-seekers in emergency centres (CAS) and to create – mostly in small villages in the countryside – huge regional hubs hosting, in some cases, more than a thousand asylum-seekers and described by interviewees across the whole political spectrum as "concentration camps" or "lagers". The presence of these centres imposed a disproportional administrative burden to the municipalities involved – mostly led by independent mayors – and generated increasing tensions between Prefects and local administrations and between the asylum-seekers and the local population, often pushed by anti-migrant entrepreneurs.

The imbalanced dispersion of asylum-seekers throughout the region, the organization of the reception system around emergency centres (often contested by local administrations) rather than around the

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.anci.it/index.cfm?layout=dettaglio&IdDett=59143>.

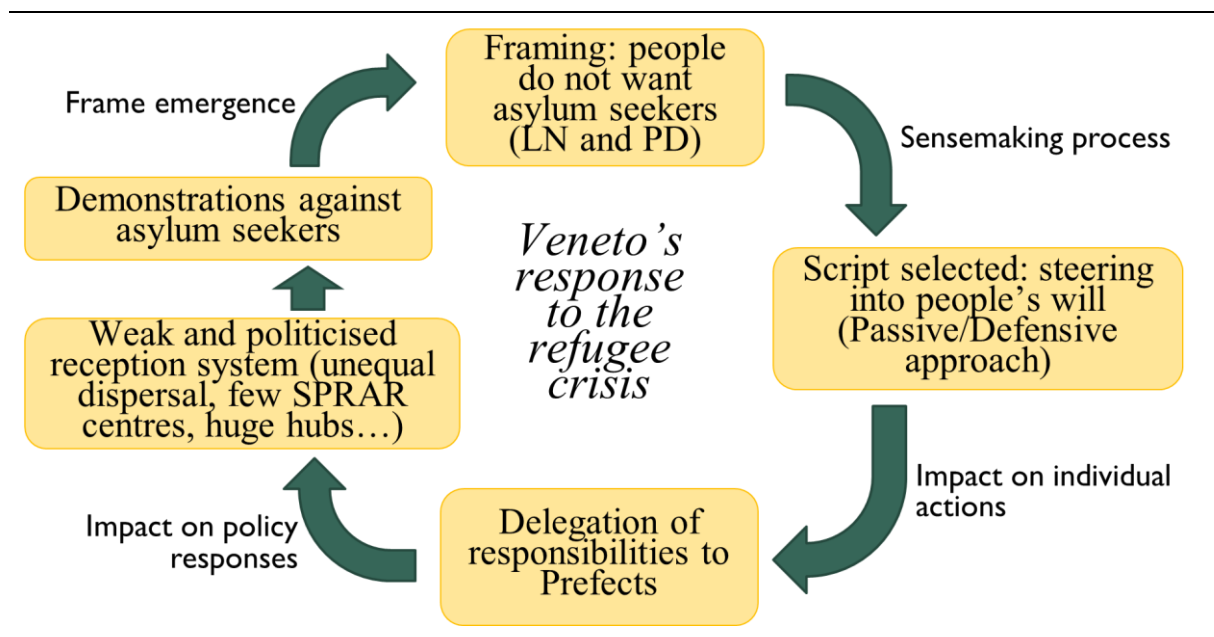
SPRAR system, and the huge concentrations of asylum-seekers in specific centres or areas, finally, led to an increasing political contestation around asylum and to widespread anti-refugee protests throughout the region. Lunaria (2017) identifies 43 anti-refugee protests in Veneto in 2016, of which 10 were organised by the LN, 1 by an independent right-wing mayor, 5 by extreme-right movements and 26 by anti-migrant committees (2 protests had mixed organizers). As revealed by the semi-structured interviews, the protests organized by the LN can be mostly interpreted as strategic or defensive actions aimed at maintaining or gaining consensus among the local population, while those enacted by the extreme right are mostly driven by ideological considerations. Importantly, an analysis of the 43 protest events reveals that 28 of them were aimed against the creation of regional hubs or big CAS centres in former hotels, while only 6 of them were aimed against small reception structures (CAS or SPRAR)¹¹. This seems to suggest the existence of a causal relationship between the inefficiencies of the reception system and the protests. Importantly, these inefficiencies also led to mobilisations of left-wing actors and asylum-seekers themselves, particularly within the big hubs or in opposition to anti-refugee protests (see Ambrosini, 2018: 122). The creation of the hubs seems to have been a crucial event that created turbulence in the regional governance system and was indeed mentioned by several interviewees – both from the far right and the left – as the key event that pushed them to take action. Both the semi-structured interviews and the SNA, conversely, seem to suggest that pro-migrant mobilisations had a very limited impact on actors' perceptions (with the only exception of fringe political actors) and were mostly perceived as the initiative of narrow leftist or catholic groups, not representative of the broader population.

While more research is needed to specifically assess frame emergence, the analysis clearly suggests a key role of these anti-migrant protests in this process. The framing literature explains that frame emergence is strictly linked to the availability and accessibility of frames and that “accessibility increases with chronic or frequent use of a consideration over time or from temporary contextual cues – including communications – that regularly or recently bring the consideration to mind” (Druckman, 2011: 10). Repeated exposure to a frame, in other words, induces frequent processing, which in turn increases the accessibility of the frame. This calls into question the role of local media which, as underlined by all the four experts interviewed, instrumentally contributed to raising the salience of asylum in the region by reporting extensively on tensions between newly arrived migrants and local citizens in areas hosting temporary settlements (Castelli Gattinara, 2017: 325). In fact, a detailed report by Tronchin and Di Pasquale (2017), which has analysed frames and narratives promoted by local media in Veneto in 2017, concludes that most of the news on immigration in these newspapers focus on local protests against asylum-seekers. Also, the report finds that reactions from local politicians, anti-migrant committees and citizens are given much more space compared to the one dedicated to data and information on the functioning of the reception system, interviews with experts or neutral explanations of the phenomenon.

These considerations and the material collected through semi-structured interviews seem to suggest, therefore, that anti-migrant protests by the local population played a key role in shaping actors' perceptions of the hostility of the local population. These widespread anti-migrant protests, in other words, have been both the cause and the effect of political actors' passive or defensive/strategic stances towards public opinion: as described in Figure 11, this dynamic seems to feed on itself.

¹¹ For the remaining seven episodes Lunaria (2017) does not specify the target of the protest.

Figure 11. Veneto's response to the refugee crisis.



Conclusion

This paper has developed an innovative micro-macro-micro approach to study asylum governance and has applied it to the case of Veneto, carefully chosen for its powerful heuristic value. Mostly relying on insights from framing and sensemaking theories and accounts of power within networks, this approach allowed me to open the “black box” of asylum governance processes during the asylum crisis, showing the mechanisms within the system that led to the inefficient asylum management and increasing political contestation around asylum issues in Italy.

Three key findings emerge from the analysis:

First, the paper has shown the role of processes that construct meanings and understandings in shaping actors' strategies and actions. This cognitive dimension has often been neglected in the literature on the Italian refugee crisis, which focused on the extent to which party positions are ideology-driven or strategically driven but has mostly ignored that these ideological or strategic positions are driven by actors' conceptualisations and understandings of the effects of change in underlying social systems. Furthermore, this paper has shown that, in a politicised asylum governance system such as the Venetian one, what really drives political actors' strategies is not really their understandings of the causes and effects of asylum-seeking flows but, rather, their understandings of the causes and consequences of public attitudes on immigration. The analysis conducted in Veneto has thus revealed that anti-migrant public attitudes *per se* do not influence decision-making processes but that what matters is how political actors frame and make sense of these attitudes. This sensemaking process depends on the different signals and cues that political actors pick up from the environment in which they operate and how they process this information. It can ultimately lead actors with similar ideological positions (such as PD members and fringe centre-left actors) to adopt very different policy strategies and construct different meanings of the asylum crisis.

Secondly, this paper has revealed the often-neglected role of politics in asylum policy-making and governance, which corrects a tendency of the existing literature to see the asylum crisis as the mere outcome of structural inefficiencies. By applying SNA, this paper clearly demonstrates that what really

shapes policy outputs is the ideological profile of the political actors involved, their capacity to mobilise their different understandings, their power, positioning and behaviours. In the very fragmented and polarised Venetian governance network, characterised by very high levels of conflict between the different institutions and levels of governance, the most powerful actors did not mobilise to activate the network's relational potential. In such a context, the political competition between the main parties and the political contestation by anti-immigration political entrepreneurs constrained policy-making and prevented the development of efficient policy responses while, rather, producing a fractured, weak and contested reception system.

Finally, the paper has provided important insights on the interplay between policy-making, politics and political contestation in shaping asylum governance and constituting the Italian refugee crisis. Crucially, it has illustrated the politicisation of asylum governance in Veneto, by showing the circular relationship between public attitudes on migration, frame emergence, asylum policy-making, asylum politics and anti-refugee campaigning. The analysis has indeed highlighted not only that anti-refugee protests have significantly influenced actors' understandings of public attitudes on immigration, their strategies and policy responses, but also that these anti-migrant mobilizations have been largely shaped by these very policy responses and the inefficiencies of the regional reception system.

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Annex**Table A1. Sample of Interviewees**

		<i>N° of Semi-structured Interviews</i>	<i>N° of Structured Questionnaires</i>
<i>Party Actors</i>	Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Villages/Towns)	6	6
	Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Provincial Capitals)	6	5
	Members of Regional Government	1	0
	Regional MPs	1	1
	National MPs	6	5
	Party Leaders	4	3
<i>Non-Party Actors</i>	Deputy Prefects	2	2
	Trade unions	2	1
	Advocacy NGOs	3	3
	Service Providers	4	3
	Experts	4	4
	Anti-migrant committees	1	1
	Civil Servants (Regional/Local authorities)	3	3
	TOTAL	43	37

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